EDITORIAL

Process

Michael E. Stevenson

I am a big fan of process. Some might argue that process in business is synonymous with bureaucracy, but from my perspective, process defines the backbone of many failure investigations. Lack of process creates chaos.

I have written in the past about methodology and using the scientific method to focus investigations, but process is different. Basic agreement on the application of tools and techniques, order of operations, and documentation protocols are paramount in smoothly executed investigations. Failure to generate basic agreement can create long-term problems not only from a resource usage and information understanding perspective, but also may shade the interpretation of available data.

For those of you who have spent considerable time conducting multi-party or collaborative investigations, I'd be willing to bet you have had some experience with "process gone awry." Often there is debate about what tool is the right tool and whose approach is superior, and while these debates often have merit and are occasionally entertaining, they can miss the point. In today's environment, it is not uncommon to encounter laboratories equipped with the latest digital innovations. These tools are excellent and truly advance our investigative ability. However, without proper process in place and without a basic agreement of the application of the technology, making effective use of the newly available data in our investigations can be challenging and sometimes even misleading.

On the flip side, many labs have modern tools, but not the "latest and greatest" of each and every tool. These labs often have the benefit of establishing practical processes and having the benefit of experience in application. Even without all the bells and whistles included, investigations in these environments can run smoother and faster than those in others.

What is needed is a balance and a reminder to focus on the investigative process rather than the vintage of the available tools. Certainly, as technology unlocks new tools for us, investigations can probe further into new areas at times. What we must avoid is losing the underlying skill sets and foregoing the development of the "old school" data that we have reliably utilized for decades.

By its very nature, failure analysis is and always will be a cutting edge discipline, but I encourage everyone to remember the basics and avoid turning the cutting edge into the "bleeding edge." Process might be a seemingly boring part of what we do, but don't let it derail your next investigation, regardless of what tools you work with.

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